

The Origin and Interpretation of the Names of the Rivers and Streams of Clayton County (pt. 4)

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THE ORIGIN AND INTERPRETATION OF THE NAMES OF THE
RIVERS AND STREAMS OF CLAYTON COUNTY.

BY ELIPHALET PRICE.

[Concluded from page 800.]

In ascending the waters of the Turkey River, from its junction with the Volga, the first tributary that we meet is Panther Creek, having its source at the eastern extremity of Panther Mound, and flowing from thence northward a distance of about four miles. With the exception of Turkey River, this stream is the only one in the County that retains its Indian name, translated into English. Oliver Phelps, an Indian trader from western New York, who had a trading post at the mouth of the Volga in 1835, became acquainted with the Indian name of this stream through his Indian hunters and, in translating it, called it *Painter* Creek, by which name it is still called by many of the early settlers. The animal represented in the name of this stream is generally, throughout New England and western New York, called a *painter*; along the valley of the Mississippi it is known as the *panther*; in Pennsylvania, and throughout the Cumberland range of mountains, it is commonly called the *catamount*, or cat of the mountain, which is perhaps the most appropriate name, as the word panther is a generic term, and applies to the entire family or genus of animals which are of a spotted character. These animals were quite numerous along the waters and in the forest of Turkey River as late as 1839, and were of a tawney red in summer, changing to a dark steel grey in winter. The Indian tradition, that has handed down the name of this stream, relates that at a distant period of time, an Indian family that had encamped near the mouth of the creek, were attacked in the night-time by a panther, and a small child, belonging to the family, seized and carried away. From this circumstance the creek was regarded by the Indians as an unlucky stream, and avoided as a camping ground, it being under the control of the evil spirit. In proof of which there were many evidences given by the Indians,

which to rehearse here, would lengthen this article beyond its proper limit.

A few miles above this stream, Poney Creek unites its waters with the Turkey. This stream rises in the counties of Fayette and Winnesheik, and enters the county under the name of Roberts' Creek, which it retains for several miles, when it disappears, and after running under ground about two miles, re-appears under the name of Poney Creek. John Roberts, from whom the northern part of this stream takes its name, became its first resident in 1839. He was a young man of some education—a bachelor, and an atheist. Upon a shelf that ranged over his fire-place, might be seen a few smoky volumes, consisting of the Bible, Volney's Ruins, Paine's Age of Reason, and a part of the works of Voltaire. He had poured over these volumes, until he had become so familiar with their contents, that it seemed like an easy matter for him to vanquish, in Biblical controversy, an uneducated opponent. He was a calm, unexcitable, good-natured fellow; and nothing delighted him so much, as a controversy with one of those gospel pioneers, that were often met with in those days upon the border, calling it to repentance and a remembrance of the Sabbath day. These Gospel heralds, were often converted hunters, who, having provided themselves with a hymn-book and Bible, a tin-horn and an Indian pony, meek with years, and lowly in flesh, would sally forth along the border, hewing away the roughness of the pioneer, that he might be prepared for the coming of a more educated ministry. As this personage was a prominent character in the early settlement of Turkey River, and has long since passed away with the hunter and the Indian, we will here (preliminary to the re-introduction of Roberts) give the exordium of a sermon delivered at a temporary revivel on Turkey River in 1836, by our old and much-respected friend, Uncle Joe Clark :

“BROTHERS AND SISTERS : The sarmin that I shell talk on, is about this : ‘Remember the Sabbath day, an keep it holy.’ Now, my frends, it were last Saturday nite, when Ike Miller santered over to my cabin, an sez he, Uncle Joe, spose we take a coon hunt ter nite, an sez I agreed. I were allers mighty fond

a coon huntin, an so we tuk down on Little Turkey, an arter santeren around thru the timber, an shyen keerfully along up the creek, an the moon hed got smartly up, an nary coon out, we kinder lean'd to'ards hum, when Ike's dog opened, on spoon-run with his nateral yelp, and arter we got thar, the coon hed tuk a hackberry, an Ike hed chopt his foot right smart the day afore helpen ole man Springer throw a bee-tree, an so it kinder fell on me to go up arter the coon, an when I got up tu were the critter sot, in the upper forks, an were about to grab him by the tail and slat him down, there wus a gospel feelin cum over me rite smartly, and sez I, Ike ' 'bout what time mite it be?' and sez he, 'why, Uncle Joe, I reckon its close on tu mornin;' and sez I, 'if that's so, its the Sabbath day, an this here coon may go,' an so I clum down agin. An now. Brothers an Sisters, that's what the Scriptor sez, 'Remember the Sabbeth day and keep it holy,' coon or no coon."

Here, Uncle Joe gave a toot on his horn, took a drink from a tin cup, and then launched forth with his sermon, the theology of which, bore a close resemblance to its exordium.

Uncle Joe was always a welcome guest at our cabin; and on one occasion, while we were preparing for him its evening hospitalities, Roberts came in, being on his way home from Dubuque. He had hardly become seated, when Uncle Joe, turning towards him, threw his head downward, so as to bring his gaze to bear from over the top of his spectacles, and after eyeing him for a moment, he observed, "Young man, do you believe in the soundings of the Gospel horn?"

Roberts paused for a moment to make a survey of the source from which this unexpected question came, and then led off with a reply, that soon run into a warm Biblical discussion. The old man, who would get a little confused occasionally, would stop short, give a toot upon his horn, the Gospel soundings of which, would seem to arouse him up, when he would start off anew, with seemingly more clear and vigorous ideas. Presently, Roberts began to weave around him the net-work of his atheistical doctrines, and at length, having got the old man in a tight place, Uncle Joe began to breathe heavy, and struggle under a liberal flow of perspiration, when, in the midst of a sentence, he came to a silent halt. Turning to look upon him, we discovered that a cloud of wrath had settled upon his brow, which was fast spreading downward over the features of his face, and as it culminated

upon his quivering lip, he sprang to his feet, and bringing his fists together, exclaimed—"You ongodly hethen, I ken lick more salvation inter yer in two minits then ye deserve, an I'll do it." Thereupon, Uncle Joe began to throw his buckskin, when Roberts made for the outlet of the cabin, and we saw him no more that night. The old man paced up and down the cabin for a time, occasionally going to the door, and throwing out upon the stillness of the night a blast of triumph from his horn, when he observed, "I know'd when I got riled up, I could make that ongodly hethen take water mity quick. Yer see, cap'tn, (bringing his fist down on the table) the Gospel will win every time, if yer only give her a fair show."

The origin of the name of Pony Creek, is traced to the following incident: A person by the name of Gool, having settled upon the creek in 1840, and commenced the opening of a farm, soon after began to observe a decrease in the number of his pigs and chickens, and, upon giving to the cause a proper investigation, he discovered that it was owing to his farm being located near an encampment of Indians, who continued to increase their indebtedness, until it had culminated with the last chicken and a solitary pig, in whose prospective family, Gool had fondly cherished the hope of restoring that branch of his agricultural pursuits. It was this incident that prompted him to bring about a settlement with the Indians, which he did by quietly levying upon two of their ponies, and conveying them to Illinois, where he exchanged them for cattle, with which he returned to his farm, and was enabled to make a display of prosperity, that loomed proudly above the more tardy climbings of his conscientious neighbors. To perpetuate a remembrance of this sudden prosperity of Gool, his neighbors bestowed upon the stream that flowed by his door, the name of Pony Creek.

There is a tributary of this stream, known as the Dry Mill Branch. It received its name from a saw-mill built upon the stream by Elisha Boardman, in 1837, under the mill-wright direction of Horace Brownson. During the erecting of the

mill, there appeared to be an ample supply of water for creating the power necessary for working its machinery; but when the mill and dam were completed, and the flow of the stream arrested, the weight of water in the dam forced an underground passage through the rocky bed of the creek so formidable, that the mill was abandoned, without having rendered any service whatever. Mr. Boardman and Brownson were the two first settlers in that part of the county, having located there in 1836. They were formerly the proprietors of the principal part of the land upon which the town of Elkader is located, and where they are both still residing, at an advanced period of life, respected by all who knew them, as pioneers of "thirty years ago."

About seven miles above Pony Creek, are the far-famed "Big Springs," of Turkey River, being two in number, and but a short distance apart. The largest of these springs, has been estimated to yield six hundred gallons per minute. They come from the base of a bluff, upon the north side of the river, and move with a deep and sluggish flow through a prairie bottom, but a few yards, when they unite with the waters of the river. They are regarded as a great natural curiosity, and are often visited by strangers, who find them but a short drive from Elkader, along the valley of the Turkey.

While pursuing the windings of the Volga, in our last article, we omitted to mention the name of Cox Creek, a stream that flows into the Volga from the south, and gives its name to the township through which it winds. This stream received its name from Joseph Cox, who erected a cabin near its mouth in 1839, where he resided but a few months, and then withdrew from the country. After many enquiries, we have not been enabled to discover any person in that neighborhood who knew him. We were at his cabin about the time he located there, and remember him as a small man who claimed to be a hunter.

There is a stream known as "Hickory Creek," which flows across the northern boundary of the county, near the centre of the town of Hardin, and empties into the Yellow River, in

the county of Alamakee. This stream received its name from Graham Thorn, the founder of the village of Sodom, which, previous to a visit from the United States Cavalry, under the command of Capt. Sumner, stood upon the boundery of the neutral land near this stream.

Thorn was a contraband trader with the Indians—a principal proprietor, and the first and only Mayor of Sodom. He was also a zealous Jackson man, and was in the habit of calling inanimate things around him by the name of "Old Hickory." His sled, ox-yoke, wagon, or hat, were alike generally addressed by the name of "Old Hickory." Being at Sodom soon after an Indian payment in 1840, when the town was crowded with traders, gamblers, teamsters and Indians, some person during the night, preliminary to relieving an Indian of his annuity, had taken the precaution to quiet any objections he might raise, by knocking out his brains with a hatchet. Thorn, while looking upon the dead Indian the next morning, addressed him as follows: "Well, Old Hickory, you've gone up, have yer; yer orter kept yer eye skin'd, old feller. There's folks around here that act as though they warn't brought up decently; and boys, this thing must be stopt."

We have now concluded our remembrance of the origin of the names of the rivers and streams of Clayton County. It is now thirty-three years since we first looked upon them winding their way silently through the prairie and the forest. We have seen the pioneer hunter approach them, and have heard the first echoes of his axe and rifle. We have partaken of his hospitality, and sat by the blazing fire of his hearth and listened to the story of his life. We have held to his fevered lips the cooling waters of the babbling spring, and have raised his emaciated form from its straw couch that he might, for the last time, look out upon the forest-clad hills of Turkey River, the scenes of his many hunting exploits, and we have often helped to round up the little hillock that marked, for a time, the last resting place of the hunter who, if living, could tell you that he had learned, amid the solitudes of the forest and the prairie, that there was a God. Good by, Mr. Annals.

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